

Serbia: Tadic Victory Far From Assured

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Moderate candidate must mobilise those who did not vote if he is to win.

While Boris Tadic has already been hailed as Serbia's future president in much of the media, he still faces a difficult and uncertain struggle against his rival in the second round of the presidential election, the hard-line nationalist Tomislav Nikolic.

The more pro-western Tadic, leader of the Democratic Party, DS, and Nikolic, vice-president of the Serbian Radical Party, SRS, have both gone through to the second round of voting due on June 27.

In the first, Tadic won 27.6 per cent, much higher than expected, as opposed to 30.44 per cent for Nikolic.

But whether the former will win the day, analysts say, depends on his ability to mobilise Serbia's hitherto deeply divided democratic forces.

Analysts say if Tadic succeeds in getting the democratic bloc to support him, Serbia will continue on the reform track, whereas if Nikolic wins, though no sanctions will re-appear, Europe will abandon Serbia to drift.

This has prompted some international representatives to suggest that the election holds the key to future relations between Serbia and Europe, making this presidential ballot the most important single event since the ousting of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000.

On June 14, one day after the first round, the international community voiced open support for Tadic and put pressure on Serbian prime minister Vojislav Kostunica to do the same.

Kostunica's presidential hopeful, Dragan Marsicanin, had failed miserably in the poll. With only 13.29 per cent of the vote, his tally placed a question mark over the very survival of the ruling coalition.

A source close to the government told IWPR that Kostunica had spoken to the French ambassador - France being the country the premier sees as closest to him - who had warned he would lose the support of the European Union unless he backed Tadic in the second round.

Highly placed US officials were also reported to have telephoned Kostunica to say he would be held responsible for a Radical victory if he failed to endorse Tadic openly.

On June 14, the EU collectively raised its voice urging the country's democratic forces to rally behind Tadic.

The EU High Representative spokeswoman Christina Gallach said Brussels had urged "all the democratic leaders to join forces, rally around Tadic and thus cast their vote for the European future of their country".

To add to the confusion, however, government sources say that on the night after the first round of voting Nikolic had also telephoned Kostunica, offering an alliance with the Radicals.

Whether the moderate candidate wins in the second round now depends on what happens to the votes that went earlier to the principal defeated candidates - above all, those that went to Marsicanin and Serbian tycoon Bogoljub Karic, who took 18 per cent.

In the first round, Tadic needed about 80,000 votes to catch up with Nikolic's 930,000 votes.

But Tadic cannot count on the automatic support of all the pro-government votes, or those of Karic, in spite of an announcement on June 16 that Kostunica was finally endorsing the DS candidate.

Analysts have noted the increasingly fickle nature of the electorate, with many voters ignoring their party's official endorsement.

Voting figures show Marsicanin failed to mobilise anything like all the ruling coalition's normal voting base. The coalition parties won more than 1.5 million votes in the previous parliamentary ballot.

Even worse, Marsicanin failed to galvanise the support of his own Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, which took more than 700,000 votes in last December's general election.

Another problem facing Tadic is the bitter political war that still rages between Kostunica's DSS, and Tadic's DS. Many observers predict DSS supporters will not lightly switch to a DS candidate.

Political analyst Ljiljana Bacevic predicted that Tadic could only count on “a smaller part of Marsicanin's votes”.

Even though most analysts (traditionally inclined to pro-western parties) maintain Tadic will win the second round, there is no euphoria at Tadic's campaign headquarters.

Sources close to Tadic have told IWPR he can win the election only if three factors combine.

One is obtaining the active support of Kostunica and Karic. The second is getting those who did not vote the first time to come out and so increase the overall turnout. The third is marshalling a mass of different social groups into a broad front against the ultranationalist candidate.

Although Karic said on the eve of the first round of voting that he would back Tadic in the second, he has since struck a more hesitant note. Encouraged by his own success, Karic now insists Tadic must pledge to fulfil a range of pre-election promises before he can get his endorsement.

Officials from Tadic's campaign headquarters told IWPR that the DS candidate held talks with Karic on June 14, which proved fruitless.

According to Belgrade analyst Slobodan Antonic, even if Karic endorses Tadic, his followers, mostly poorly-educated rural dwellers and Kosovo Serbs, could not so easily switch to the DS candidate who appeals more to middle class, urban voters.

This places still more emphasis on the need to mobilise the part of the electorate that abstained from voting in the first round.

Many are natural supporters of the reformist G17 Plus party. Surveys suggest many of this party's voters abstained from backing the conservative Marsicanin, despite official G17 Plus backing for him.

Such voters see themselves as closer to Tadic in terms of political programmes, so stayed at home.

It was the same with voters of the coalition of the Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, and New Serbia, NS. They either abstained or voted for Karic - not Marsicanin.

Supporters of these three parties - around 600,000 in total - could be Tadic's vital spare voters, though Nikolic has no less chance of finding potential voters in this pool than Tadic.

Thus, Tadic's final trump card may be his ability to mobilise a broad front against the ultranationalist candidate, echoing the success of Jacques Chirac in the last French presidential election against the Front National.

To achieve this, Tadic will need the strong but discreet backing of the international community which apparently will not be lacking.

But he will also need something approaching a national consensus against extreme nationalism.

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